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Massive Dust Cloud From China Reaches North America

By Kanina Holmes

WINNIPEG, Manitoba (Reuters) - An enormous swirling dust cloud, originating in the deserts of China and Mongolia, has soared all the way across the Pacific Ocean to western Canada, raising fears among meteorologists that it would be a danger to aircraft.

``It was pretty spectacular,'' said Rene Servranckx, a meteorologist at the Canadian Meteorological Center in Montreal, who tracked the cloud by satellite and estimated that at one point it stretched for 1,250 miles.

There have been no reports of close calls by aircraft, Servranckx added, and the cloud is now beginning to break up as it continues its journey east.

The massive dust cloud began as a sand storm in the Taklimakan Desert in western China and the Gobi desert in eastern Mongolia in early April and was lifted by heavy winds, said Servranckx.

Picking up industrial pollution over China, it crossed Japan and Russia to the Gulf of Alaska, then came down the west coast of Canada.

``What's unusual with this is, typically, these events do not travel great distances,'' said Servranckx.

Meteorologists tracked the cloud's path using the same technology they use to trace fallout from volcanic eruptions.

There was concern the mass of dust could -- like volcanic ash -- endanger airplanes, especially jets, by choking engines sandblasting the aircraft's hull.

``It's a potential (danger) because aircraft fly so fast that, even if you have these small particles that are like dust or sand, the aircraft is flying at 800 kilometers an hour, so it can be a big impact,'' said Servranckx.

Weather experts say the cloud likely made it this far because it caught a ride on some very high air flows, traveling as much as 7 miles above the Earth.

Despite its height, weather forecasters say the particles were clearly visible from the ground, creating hazy weather in its wake.

``It almost looks like a cloud, but it's maybe darker and maybe doesn't have exactly have the same color as regular clouds,'' Servranckx told Reuters.

Clumps of the cloud still hover over parts of the Canadian Prairies and the Great Lakes and weather experts expect it to soon drift into the midwestern and eastern United States.

``It looks like it's going to dipsy-doodle over North America,'' said Jay Anderson, a meteorologist with Environment Canada in the western province of Manitoba.

``It's kind of spread up in high levels now. All of the low level dust has fallen out, so it's kind of caught in the jet stream

flow," said Anderson.

Meteorologists said the cloud was a dramatic demonstration of the problems of atmospheric pollution.

``This is just another example of when you release something in the atmosphere, it will travel great, great distances," said Servranckx.

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